

A Dialogue on Ayn Rand's Ethics

Reply to Robert H. Bass, "Egoism versus Rights" (Spring 2006)

Egoism and Rights

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While Robert H. Bass sees a conceptually insurmountable gap between egoism and rights, it would be most difficult to show that such a gap exists between *Ayn Rand's* ethics properly understood and her rights theory. He is correct to point out that thinkers influenced by Rand see an intimate connection between her ethical egoism and her advocacy of libertarian rights, although as his paper helps to indicate, there has been much theoretical confusion about the exact nature of their relation. Some theories do a much better job of demonstrating their relation than others.¹ I believe, however, that Bass's argument rests on a misunderstanding of the general flavor of Rand's egoism, and that demonstrating the relation between her ethics and her rights theory involves a recognition of her ethical egoism as a virtue ethics, entailing a rejection of consequentialist theories of the good.

Bass (2006, 337) states the nature of the alleged conflict between egoism and rights in the form of what he calls the Argument:

Suppose an agent has a choice between two (and only two) options that are equally good in terms of his interests, but only one of which is rights-respecting. If he selects one of his options, he will respect the rights of some other person; if he selects the other, he will violate that person's rights. Which, if either, of the options is it morally better or morally required that he take?

A bit of further clarification is needed, as to the meaning of an “an agent’s interests.” This rests on Bass’s two-fold definition of *egoism*: “1. An *egoist* takes his own non-moralized interests to be of ultimate value. 2. *Egoism* is the moral theory that holds that everyone should be an egoist” (334). So an egoistic agent, by this definition, is one who considers options in terms of what is good with respect to his *non-moralized* interests.

Immediately striking about the Argument is that an agent considering options—one rights-respecting and the other not—that are equally good in terms of his non-moralized interests doesn’t quite resemble an agent deliberating as heroes do from any of Rand’s novels, for instance. Considering that the heroes embody Rand’s moral ideals and that Rand declared that she was advancing a *new concept* of egoism, we have to wonder whether the Argument is a major misfire against Randian egoism and rights theory.

I believe that it is a major misfire, but this response requires some fleshing out. To state the main points in general terms:

- A. Rand’s egoism is not consequentialist;
- B. Her egoism falls into the “moralized interest” camp, meaning that her understanding of egoism presupposes other moral concepts;
- C. There are sound reasons for calling her ethics egoistic based on the characteristics of her ethics; and
- D. Far from being separate poles of moral thought, her egoism and her rights theory express a unitary moral principle centering around the requirements of man’s life *qua* man.

With regard to A, Rand’s egoism is not consequentialist, despite traditional categorizations of egoism as such. In asking whether the Argument proves too much, Bass implicitly puts egoism into the camp of consequentialist theories that, by conceptual and logical necessity, are incompatible with rights. The Argument is actually nothing more than a conceptual restatement of the incompatibility between consequentialism and rights-based constraints. The Argument shows the incompatibility between all consequentialist theories (which either jettison rights-talk altogether or treat “rights”

as contingently useful but violable for the sake of prescribed consequences) and rights, but the Argument doesn't show that rights are incompatible with theories that take things other than consequences to be all that matters. This is enough by itself to show that the Argument doesn't apply to Rand's ethics and rights theory, since by standard accounts of consequentialism, Rand's egoism isn't consequentialist: she doesn't regard consequences to be the only things that matter. Indeed, consequence-talk in conventional terms—often, a narrow focus on attempts to promote concrete end-states rather than guidance by abstract principles, or a focus on measurable *maximization* along some dimension of one or more concrete desiderata (e.g., pleasure, utility, numbers benefitted, numbers of specified acts performed or avoided)—is quite foreign to Randian moral deliberation, because Rand approaches moral theory with something quite different in mind, specifically, the requirement of a guide for living expressive of a rational being's nature. Since Rand's theory isn't consequentialist, it follows, *a fortiori*, that Bass's Argument doesn't even establish that her egoism is consequentialist.²

With regard to point B, Rand's egoism isn't consequentialist because her theory doesn't rest on a conception of non-moralized interests; rather, she is a virtue theorist who bases her understanding of egoism upon her understanding of virtue. (Or, one might say that her understandings of both are mutually reinforcing.) It is quite contrary to Rand's method to define such things as *interests*, *self-interest*, or *egoism* midstream, without some background context conditioning her understanding of such. Of central and crucial importance, initially, is defining the objective reasons for a code of values in the first place—in short, the requirements for a conceptual being to live and prosper—and then on that basis to identify the virtues required by that code of values. Then comes the issue of the *proper beneficiary* of a conceptual being's moral actions. Leonard Peikoff (1991, 230) states the point ably:

The concept of “egoism” identifies merely one aspect of an ethical code. It tells us not what acts a man should take, but who should profit from them. Egoism states that each man's

primary obligation is to achieve his own welfare, well-being, or self-interest (these terms are synonymous here). It states that each man should be “concerned with his own interests”; that he should be “selfish” in the sense of being the beneficiary of his own moral actions. Taken by itself, this principle offers no practical guidance. It does not specify values or virtues; it does not define “interests” or “self-interest”—neither in terms of “life,” “power,” “pleasure,” nor of anything else. It simply states: whatever man’s proper self-interest consists of, that is what each individual should seek to achieve.

To put another way: Man’s proper self-interest isn’t defined in a vacuum, as a primary, but by reference to the requirements of the life of a rational, conceptual being. The basic standard by which to judge one’s actions is whether it accords with one’s life as a rational being. The chief virtue by which to live, the virtue that entails the other virtues and both expresses (or constitutes) one’s life as a rational being as well as leads to successful living and achievement of values, is the virtue of rationality. One is acting according to one’s proper self-interest when one is exercising the virtue of rationality in pursuit of successful human living. This is enough to disqualify Rand’s egoism from being a standard consequentialist theory, as it more closely resembles a standard virtue theory.

With regard to point C, Rand’s ethics is egoistic because it expresses aspects of an ethical code that mark out a code as egoistic. It is incorrect to say because she *first* identifies a standard of value and develops a conception of virtue that her conception of egoism (as thereby a “moralized interest” theory) is parasitic upon moral concepts or upon some other moral theory. Rather, first, as has already been stated, the concept of egoism merely identifies an aspect of a moral theory, and does not define the entirety of a moral theory. Second, the false alternative of having *either* to define interests in terms of morality *or* to define morality in terms of interests is contrary to Rand’s methodology, which is to develop our understanding of each alongside the other, in a mutually-reinforcing fashion. The purpose

of morality is borne of practical, self-regarding necessity—to provide a code of values by which to survive and prosper as rational beings, or, in Rand’s terms, the principles proper to the life of man *qua* man. As to the egoistic aspect of this: it is in one’s interests to identify and adopt the code of values required to achieve success in one’s life and the pursuit of one’s values. There is a profoundly personal and “selfish” necessity here; the purpose of ethics and justification of action isn’t service to others, or society, or some supernatural dimension, but service to one’s own life and one’s rationally considered ends.³ Each person properly exists for his own sake, for the enjoyment of his own life. While what each person’s particular rationally considered ends and life enjoyments consist of is subject to personal context,⁴ the standard of value for each person is his own life (the fulfillment, furtherance, etc. of his own life), and the basic virtue required to achieve one’s ends is the virtue of rationality. There is much more that can be said to flesh out the egoistic characteristics of Rand’s ethics, but the basic point here is that the agent-relative character and individualistic *aspects* of her value and virtue theory are the basis for calling her ethics egoistic.

Finally, with regard to point D, Rand’s egoism and rights theory go hand-in-hand because they unitarily express the basic idea that human life (proper human living) requires the exercise of rationality. This is to say, to repeat a familiar theme, that neither her egoism nor her rights theory precede one another; rather, they each represent different aspects of what it is to live the life proper to man *qua* man. One—egoism—concerns those principles of actions one must adopt if one is to properly serve one’s life and to prosper; the other—rights—concerns those principles of actions each individual must adopt with respect to others in rational consideration of what each individual requires to live the life proper to a human being. Each individual requires freedom of thought and action, and by his nature properly demands his own freedom and, recognizing the same requirements in others, respects their freedom. Metaphysically, man is an individual; in one’s conceptual identifications of *man* and the requirements of his nature as a rational being, one acknowledges that he is a member of a classified set of entities, every one of them having the same

requirements for proper living. In this context, rationality and reality do not permit the supposed “egoistic” contradiction of the sort that holds that only one’s own interests are of any moral significance. (One’s conceptual identifications of the universal and the particular, and their relation to one another, go hand-in-hand, one neither preceding the other.) Rather, one recognizes the implications, for interpersonal behavior, of the principle that each person’s life to live is his own, that he exists for his own sake, with reason as his chief tool for living *qua* man. This is also to say that Rand’s understanding of the concept of *egoism* is conditioned by the rational recognition of the conditions required for human life—*any* human life.

Taken together, these points of clarification show that by attacking a theory that Rand does not advocate, the Argument misses its intended target.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Rasmussen and Den Uyl 1991 and Mack 1993a, 1993b and elsewhere.

2. See also Burgess-Jackson 2003 for further discussion on why egoism need not be conceptually classified as a consequentialist theory.

3. “Rationally considered ends” are ends that emerge through practical analysis of the ends one has, in contrast with merely the ends one happens to have.

4. This may even involve, in the context of a particular person’s life, substantial efforts helping others, but in contrast to Toohey’s pronouncement (Rand 1943, 374–76) that such is its own reward irrespective of the personal fulfillment one achieves from it.

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